2010 Census: Think Twice, Check Once

The federal government is taking a road trip, dubbed the 2010 Census Portrait of America Road Tour, to try to convince "hard-to-count audiences" to participate in this year's decennial Census. One of those particularly hard-to-count groups are those who identify as racially mixed. Many will choose to take advantage of the "mark one or more races" (MOOM) option made first available on the 2000 Census. Race scholars have been hotly debating the significance of this paradigm shift, asking: just what are the Civil Rights consequences of the Census option of "mark one or more races"?

Demonized in the early twentieth century as sexually polluting and culturally degenerate, mixed race people are now all the rage. The New York Times hails them as Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous and celebrates them as ambassadors to the post-race new world order. With Obama, our self-described "mutt" President, as its poster-child, the "the Mulatto Millennium" is finally upon us.

But the current fêting has its downside, primarily a dismantling of affirmative action and civil rights. The packaging of multiracials as the vanguard of the future too often casts civil rights organizations and efforts as outdated, associated with 1970s tribal politics by old-fashioned "monoracials." In this context, Obama's multiculti cool just seems so much more du jour than Jesse Jackson Sr.'s last-century ethnic pride. In fact, one of the most acute challenges facing the National Association for Colored People (NAACP), which celebrated its 100th anniversary last year, is the creeping sense that black people are no longer relevant in the next century.

Certainly the 1967 Loving vs Virginia Supreme Court decision legalizing interracial marriages, as well as immigration trends, have contributed to our multi-hued population, but people of mixed descent have existed in distinct communities since the colonial era in the Americas. The dramatic increase in public visibility and popularity in the last decade is also due to its appeal as a post-civil rights answer to the "race problem."

The hope that mixed race identification represents a new millennial political solution to the intractable problem of race in this U.S. is powerfully seductive. It implies, after all, the free will to choose one's race, fulfilling that most-cherished American mandate of individualism. The widely-circulated manifesto, "Bill of Rights for Mixed Race People," for instance, insists on the refusal to be "boxed" in, on the Census or anywhere else: I can check black today, more than one tomorrow, refuse to check anything the day after.
For some mixed race advocates, the Census box represents the new nonviolent resistance, a finger in the eye of the racial status quo.

Yet even the most well-intentioned individuals are often unaware of the political effects of what they see as a private choice. I personally witnessed this when I lived next to a business "empowerment zone" in a mostly black neighborhood in Tacoma, Washington. This zone, targeted for economic improvement based on racial demographics, was threatened by the sudden increase in those identifying more than one race for the Census--overnight, those who had been black became mixed, and the empowerment zone risked dissolution.

Few could have anticipated the community impact of their box-checking. Federal guidelines have since sought to correct for these unexpected effects, but my point is that the government accounting of race through the Census is explicitly designed to inform public policy and the distribution of resources. This is not about ethnic squabbling over spoils.

*It is a recognition that the Census was never meant as--nor should it be--a site for self-expression.*

Some mixed race advocates claim that they are destroying what Mark Twain called the "legal fiction of race." But, ironically, this position only tends to reinforce the logic behind categorization, for it assumes the destruction of a racial homogeneity that never existed. According to some studies, well over 80% of people of African descent in North America are mixed and Latinos also, of course, have mestizo and diasporic mixes. There is no purity to overturn.

Others suggest that more refined racial categorization--new and improved boxes--can better represent individual hybridity. But Brazil and South Africa have long experimented with legal racial designations of every nuance and shade. No one would say these two countries' elaborate taxonomies have led to racial equity and progress. Quite the opposite.

I often hear: if I check black (or Latino or Asian), I will betray my white parent. But the loyalty test is a red herring: Halle Berry's white mother, for one, is on record for being proud that her daughter claimed the Academy Award for Best Actress (2002) as the first African American woman in history to do so.

How did checking a Census box become such an iconic moment to prove filial devotion?

By all means, let us honor, encourage, and study cross-cultural exchanges and multiracial experiences without making mixed race either a political special interest or the national solution to the "race problem." There are better venues in which to both represent our multi-splendored selves and more productively ally with social justice efforts.

Instead of marking more than one race when the 2010 Census appears in your mailbox this March, think twice and consider checking once.